

VZCZCXRO6084  
RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHLN RUEHPW RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHTA #0870/01 1270732  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 060732Z MAY 08  
FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2343  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE 0499  
RUCNCLS/SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1907  
RUEHAST/USOFFICE ALMATY 0415

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASTANA 000870

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN (M. O'MARA)

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN - ALL IS CALM IN ALMATY OBLAST, AND THAT'S HOW WE LIKE IT

Ref: Astana 0767

ASTANA 00000870 001.2 OF 003

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

11. (SBU) All is calm in Almaty Oblast and its capital, Taldykorgan, and residents are enjoying a steadily improving quality of life, at least according to oblast officials. The urban population is growing, though the oblast remains largely rural and agricultural. Taldykorgan itself has experienced significant growth in investment since it was designated the oblast capital in 2001. Civil society leaders report increasing government cooperation, though they are experiencing problems with corruption, tight government control over the media, and severe restrictions on freedom of assembly. The unregistered Alga party is very active in the region, and is building a grassroots network of supporters. End Summary.

-----  
OFFICIALS SAY ALL IS STABLE, QUALITY OF LIFE IMPROVING  
-----

12. (U) During April 14-17, poloff and pol FSN visited Taldykorgan, the capital of Almaty Oblast, for a series of meetings with local government officials, NGOs, and political party leaders. According to Galiaskar Sarybaiyev, deputy director of Almaty Oblast's Department of Internal Policy, the population of Almaty oblast is largely rural. Approximately 1.6 million people live in the oblast, though only 150,000 live in Taldykorgan, the largest city. (Note: The city of Almaty is not part of the oblast, but rather is administered as a separate entity. End Note.) Sarybaiyev reported that the urban population in the oblast is growing as a result of internal migration from rural areas. Nonetheless, he said, most of the population remains in rural areas, as agriculture dominates the regional economy.

13. (SBU) Both Sarybaiyev and Ardak Sydykov, secretary of the Almaty Oblast Maslikhat (legislative body), portrayed Taldykorgan and Almaty Oblast as calm and stable, with a steadily improving quality of life. Sydykov said that when Taldykorgan became the oblast capital in April 2001, it looked like Berlin after World War II. Now, the city is clean and features newly renovated and newly constructed buildings. (Note: We were impressed by the cleanliness and orderliness of the city, and rank it as one of the cleanest in Kazakhstan. End note.) Sydykov said that the oblast budget is seven times larger than it was in 2001, and he pointed to a significant increase in the number and quality of cars in the city as evidence that the standard of living has improved. He said that when he became a Maslikhat member in 1999, citizens primarily complained about failure to receive salaries and pensions. Now, he explained,

the standard of living has improved, and citizens are far more focused on community issues such as schools, health services, quality drinking water, and the construction of roads. He said that citizens rarely participate in Maslikhat meetings, though they frequently come to the office to make complaints.

14. (SBU) Sarybaiyev maintained that the situation concerning ethnic relations in the oblast is stable and positive, and that it is the oblast government's top priority to maintain stability and keep the peace. He told us that 64% of the population is ethnic Kazakh, 18% is ethnic Russian, 9% is Uighur, and the remainder is a mix of other ethnic groups including Azerbaijani, Koreans, Kurds, Tatars, Ukrainians, and Kyrgyz. He explained that the government supports inter-ethnic relations by operating 71 ethnic cultural centers to promote the development of languages, customs, and traditions.

-----  
OFFICIAL SEES NO CONTROVERSY IN THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE  
-----

15. (SBU) Deputy director of the Almaty Oblast Ministry of Justice Murat Tanibergen told us that religious devotion is growing in the oblast, but there are few problems with religious groups and no incidents of religious extremism. He said there are 538 religious groups registered in the region, including some non-traditional groups such as the Hare Krishnas and the Baha'i. He said his office has no problems with the Jehovah's Witnesses active in the region; the government occasionally attends their services and conducts inspections to make sure that they are following legal requirements, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are very good about providing all of the information requested by the government. He said that the Religious Issues Committee in the Ministry of Justice in Astana recently solicited proposals for inclusion in new draft amendments to Kazakhstan's religion law (see reftel), but he said his office has few problems with the current law and did not have much to

ASTANA 00000870 002.2 OF 003

contribute.

16. (SBU) Tanibergen, without prompting, mentioned the ongoing dispute between local government officials and the Hare Krishna commune in the Karasai district, which is located in Almaty Oblast. He shared the usual government talking points on the issue (i.e., that the dispute is purely over property, not religion, and the government has no problem with the Hare Krishnas), and said that the local government was waiting for the Hare Krishnas to choose one of the alternate properties that had been offered to them.

-----  
CIVIL SOCIETY MATURING, WITH SOME ROADBLOCKS  
-----

17. (SBU) Representatives from the Taldykorgan City Society for Consumer Rights Protection NGO, the Democracy Support Center NGO, and the Taldykorgan Regional Women's Support Center NGO unanimously agreed that their relations with the government have improved significantly over the last five or six years, and the groups have significant freedom to operate. In addition, the women's support center has received some contracts to provide services for the government. However, the representatives said that local officials occasionally become very aggressive towards NGOs that attempt to monitor the government budget or question government expenditures. They also reported that the local government tightly controls the media, with the exception of one or two newspapers, though the NGOs are able to attract publicity through good relationships they have with individual reporters. Finally, they maintained that there is significant corruption in the government contracting process; they claimed that many government officials or their friends create their own NGOs and then funnel government money to them. Saniya Kazabulatova of the City Society for Consumer Rights Protection asserted that only 10% of government grants go to support real projects, while the remainder of the grant money is stolen through fake NGOs.

18. (SBU) Aliya Akhmediya, the Almaty Oblast representative for the Kazakhstan International Human Rights Bureau, described a tense

relationship with local government officials. (Note: Akhmediya is also the Almaty Oblast representative for the Azat opposition party, and was an opposition candidate for the parliament in last year's elections. The Azat party maintains a small office and staff in Taldykorgan, but Akhmediya did not have much to report about party activities in the off year. End note.) She works for citizens on a variety of legal and human rights complaints, including housing problems and unfair treatment in local courts. In her view, the government's attitude is that citizens would not worry about civil rights if activists like her were not provoking them. She said local officials routinely deny or fail to respond her requests for permission to hold rallies, and described a recent incident in which she organized an unsanctioned rally with a group of citizens whose homes had been demolished by the government. The government summoned her after the rally and warned her that it was illegal to instigate protest actions. Nevertheless, she told us she prefers to act rather than sit and wait for government permission.

¶9. (SBU) Akhmediya told us that the government never invites her to roundtables or conferences, but she attends when she learns of them and asks tough questions. She said, however, that her comments are never covered in the local media, because reporters know from their past experience that if they publish her comments, they will get in trouble. Finally, she claimed that the religious freedom situation in the oblast was getting worse and that the government was increasing its intrusion, though she had no specific examples.

-----  
UNREGISTERED ALGA PARTY BUILDS GRASSROOTS NETWORK  
-----

¶10. (SBU) Beniyamin Faizulin, the Almaty Oblast leader of the unregistered Alga party, agreed that local authorities consistently refused to grant permission for peaceful rallies, and told us that he and others in the party have been administratively fined for organizing unsanctioned rallies. He also said that the party has virtually no access to the media. In addition, he told us the party was recently forced out of its rented office near the center of town, and is now renovating a house on the outskirts of town to use as their office. (Note: We met in the house, which was full of maps and party materials and staffed by two or three workers. End note.) Faizulin also claimed that not long ago his wife was forced to leave her job as deputy director of a local law school because of pressure resulting from his opposition activities.

¶11. (SBU) Despite these obstacles, Faizulin was optimistic about

ASTANA 00000870 003.2 OF 003

Alga's future, and described a very active and energetic local organization. He said the party spends considerable time on outreach activities through door-to-door campaigning and working in the villages, and was very active in helping citizens resolve various social problems. He told us that 20 to 30 people come to the Alga party offices every week with various complaints, and the party helps them organize into groups to resolve their problems, such as disputes with utility companies and problems with schools. The party also helps them file complaints and lawsuits. He said that Alga is not focused on winning seats in parliament or competing in a rigged election process, but rather on building a network of leaders and activists at the local level. He explained that the party was encouraging citizens to lobby and pressure their elected members of local Maslikhats, and would ultimately like to create "shadow" governments on the local level. He described the party's work in rural areas as particularly important, because people there are completely suppressed by local akims and have no awareness of their civil or political rights. (Note: Faizulin's description of Alga's focus and activities mirrors what we have been told by Vladimir Kozlov, Alga's national-level chairman. End Note.)

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

¶12. (SBU) Local officials emphasized stability and an improving quality of life in our meetings, and from what we observed, we have no reason to doubt them: Taldykorgan in all respects appeared to be

a clean, healthy, well run city, and we did not detect any unusual undercurrent of discontent in our meetings with civil society and opposition party leaders. Nevertheless, the tight government control of the media and its efforts to prevent public assemblies is undoubtedly responsible for some of the calm, though human rights and opposition party leaders have found some traction. The Alga party in particular has seemingly developed a systematic and long-term approach to building their movement in the region. Finally, Taldykorgan represents only a small portion of the oblast population; whether the atmosphere of stability and improving quality of life extends to the much larger rural population is an open question. End comment.

ORDWAY